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### Preserving the Past (Book)

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## A book of mysteries

By Nancy Steele Brokaw

## Preserving the Past

It doesn't look like anything else that sits on the sliding shelves in the Special Collections room. It looks, in fact, like a pirate treasure book.

Decidedly Spanish in style, this enormous (one-and-a-half by three-feet) book is covered with wood boards that have been encased in leather and decorated with brass. The pages are parchment, made by shaving sheepskin to a fine level. Each page is covered with music — more precisely, with one line of melody.



Stacey Jocoy Houck (above left) and Anke Voss-Hubbard examine the chant book for clues to its origin. (Photo by Jamie Stukenberg)

This is a chant book (called a “gradual”) and its provenance and even how it ended up at the University are what Stacey Jocoy Houck, Illinois Wesleyan adjunct professor of music history, calls a “tantalizing mystery.”

Her adventures with the chant book began when Fine Arts Librarian Robert Delvin asked her, “Did you know we have an old manuscript?”

“No,” Houck replied and together they examined the chant book.

“It was a rare and unexpected thing to find at a small university,” Houck says.

She and Delvin have taken a digitized reproduction of the chant book (by Illinois Wesleyan photographer Marc Featherly) to a variety of academic meetings. Music historians have shown great interest but so far no definitive answers have been found concerning the early life of this book. Delvin thinks the chant book was “not part of a rich person’s collection.”

The pages are torn and sewn and there are stains where they have been repeatedly turned. Delvin speculates the chant book once sat on a lectern to guide monks through the mass during one-half of the liturgical year (Advent to Easter). That means a second volume most likely existed, but where is it if it survived? Delvin thought he found the companion book once at Washington University but closer examination revealed that the potential match had been stenciled whereas the IWU book is hand-lettered.

Faces drawn within the illumination on page one are particularly intriguing. They appear to be Native American. Delvin dates the book between 1550 to 1600 and wonders whether it was compiled in Spain or in the Spanish New World. Could slight deviations in the content help pinpoint the place of origin? Are these variants by intent or mistake? And how on earth did it get

to IWU? Despite Delvin's inquiries, no one seems to remember, though it has been with the University for several decades.

Houck uses the chant book in a class she teaches on the music of the Renaissance. She hopes that someday the book may become the focus of someone's doctoral dissertation. Perhaps then this wonderful example of early bookmaking will finally yield its story, along with its haunting music.



Visages on the book's first page (above left) appear to be Native American, causing speculation that it was made in the Spanish New World. (Photo by Jamie Stukenberg)